

WEST SWINDON PARISH COUNCIL

Monday 23 January at 6.00 pm
Unit 25 Westmead Industrial Estate, SN5 7YT

FULL COUNCIL

Present:

Cllr Mike Burtenshaw
Cllr Geoff Gould
Cllr Tim Makofu
Cllr Nick Martin
Cllr Mary Martin (Vice Chair)
Cllr Nandini Singh
Cllr Tim Swinyard
Cllr Caryl Sydney Smith
Cllr Keith Williams

Others: Paula Harrison, Parish Manager

Public: One virtual

Cllr M Martin chaired the meeting.

Public Questions Submitted in Advance:

1. Please specify which local organisations will experience a cut and by how much? (also relates to Q11 below) Have these organisations been consulted?

The Parish Council has offered an open grants process reviewing grant applications in September and February. In recent years, grants have been awarded to Toothill Church Friday Club, Toothill Youth Club, West Swindon CIC, Freshbrook – BEST, Toothill Big Local The Hub and Freshbrook Community Centre. Organisations will still be able to apply for funding however the overall amount available will be reduced. Organisations have not been consulted.

2. Why is youth funding being cut, bearing in mind the escalation of mental illness since Covid?

The Parish Council acknowledges that youth services are available and targeted to those most in need through Swindon Borough Council. Additional recreational youth provision has been funded over the years by West Swindon Parish Council. We recognise that these are casual fun activities and are not targeted to those at risk, or with particularly support needs. However, in light of pressures on the budget, these are discretionary activities that generally reach a very small fraction of the wider children and young people's population in West Swindon. Therefore, the Parish Council continues to invest and improve open and free access to outdoor facilities such as the pump track and the 20 play areas across West Swindon. The Parish Council will provide support to any local organisation that wishes to apply for external funding to other bodies such as the Lottery funding schemes.

3. I understand the Parish Council has contributed money towards West Swindon Library. Is Swindon Borough Council replacing this money with central funds, or will the library endure more cuts.

- *The original purpose of the grant to the Library was to help manage the impact of the Borough-wide library service restructure which reduced staffed library hours to 15 hours per week. The grant mitigated the impact of this by ensuring that local residents had ongoing access to a boosted staffed library service by grant funding two Library & Information Assistants per hour for an extra 16 hours a week. The original agreement was for a two year period to enable the public transition to a different level of staffed library services.*
- *The Parish Council has continued with that support for a further three years. The overall investment over the five year period is in the region of £125,000.*
- *During this period of investment, the Parish Council has invited the library service to provide data and proposals for a longer term model that reflects the introduction of extended access and reflects the local demand for services. Data provided in response has not demonstrated that there is a high level demand for staffed services that could not be met by instead by independent access. Additionally, Swindon Borough Council has determined to reorientate library provision by shifting access to Swindon Borough Council customer services through library staff during library opening hours. We hope this change will support future service provision in terms of opening hours however this will be a decision for Swindon Borough Council. West Swindon remains one of Swindon Borough Council's core libraries.*

In relation to 1.3:

4. £10,000 was allocated for 'Allotments' in 2022-23 and has been cut to £1,000 in 2023-24. Why such a big cut? How was the 'Allotment' money spent in 2022-23 and what impact will the proposed cut have in 2023-24?

In the last three years, the Parish Council has added funding for allotments to build up a reserve that would help offset costs related to new or expanded allotment provision. The Parish Council is currently seeking viability to expand the existing site at Blagrove. There are no other sites deemed to be suitable or available and on that basis there is no budget proposed to set aside funds into reserves for this purpose.

5. What 'Parish Improvements' can we expect to see in 2023-24?

The Parish Council works within constantly changing environments as all work is outdoors and has to flex with the impact of the weather on the local environment. We will continue to maintain public open space, this equates to 991,000 square metres of grass, 67 square kilometres of shrub bed and 69,000 linear metres of hedge. We will continue to inspect, repair and maintain 21 play areas including refurbishments at Plattes Close and Clay Pits. It will seek to improve planting and general maintenance at Shaw, Freshbrook and Toothill village centres and respond to day to day requests for flytipping and litter.

6. Why is there an increase in legal and insurance fees from £21,500 to £32,500 (an increase of 51%).

The budget proposed for insurance is increasing to bring the budgets set historically in line with both actual and anticipated expenditure. For example, insurance was budgeted at £9,000 in the current financial year and expenditure is c. £14,000. The Parish Council has added new machinery and vehicles in recent years and this

increases the annual premium. The Parish Council has increased the budget for professional fees in anticipation of increased costs relating to resolving lease arrangements and possible legal fees associated with premises.

7. Regarding 'Grants & Community' (a decrease in 47%), who will be affected by this cut and what impact will this have on community support and other local activities?

The budget proposal is based on a 50% reduction to the grant to the library service from £30,000 to £15,000 and the remainder is reductions to the overall community grant funding. Potentially future applications will be affected by the overall amount available as set out in answers (2) and (3).

8. The budget for 'Open Spaces' has been cut by 66%. What reductions in service can we expect to see?

We do not anticipate changing the current level or standard of service provision on public open spaces.

9. Could you please explain how you intend to reduce volunteer related expenditure?

These changes are proposed based on previous expenditure and year on year underspend. The Parish Council has set aside a budget of £7,800 for volunteer reward grant claims and adhoc requests for equipment.

10. On page 1 of the report, 'Grants to local organisations' is reduced by 33% to £10,000. Where is this figure in 1.3?

Under the heading of Grants & Community.

In relation to 1.4:

11. Where does the C/Tax Support Grant come from and why does this figure remain static when Parish costs are increasing?

This is an amount from Swindon Borough Council based on a formula it has determined for each Parish Council. The Parish Council is not able to change how this calculated and is not aware of any plan to change the amount based on rising costs.

12. Why is 'Grounds maintenance income' reducing?

The previous grounds income included £2,500 from vehicle sales. The current year's proposal does not.

13. There is no income from 'External Grants'. This suggests there is no planned activity to raise funds. I would appreciate clarification?

Grant funding is usually targeted towards particular outcomes, or types of projects. The Parish Council has no specific or identified projects to put forward for external funding at the current time. As and when these arise, external grant applications will be made.

14. Furthermore, I understand the 'Parish Council has no significant or guaranteed income', other than the precept of £954,670 proposed in Option 2. Is this a

weakness in terms of the business model? Does the Parish Council have an income strategy in mind?

The Parish Council has an Income Generation working group which has is considering income opportunities for example, sub letting, residential property rental, selling grounds services. It is an important consideration for the future. However, the risks of return on investment must be carefully balanced as this is public money. West Swindon Parish did not 'inherit' the assets and buildings afforded to other newly forming Parishes and as a result has no inherited assets to start with.

15. Please could you provide further information on the £187,500 earmarked for future projects. Can any of these projects be delayed to mitigate the impact of the proposed cuts? There was no Appendix A available for the public to scrutinise.

Appendix A is on the website now. £187,500 is set out below. Generally the Parish Council sets aside earmarked reserves to put money away for significant expenditure for example, for the purchase of vehicles and machinery. These could be delayed however some expenditure such as operational costs and election expenses is unavoidable.

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|-----------------------------------|---------|------------------------|
| Earmarked Reserves 2021-22 | £45,000 | Backland projects |
| | £24,500 | Election expenses |
| | £13,000 | Youth development |
| | £20,000 | Allotment development |
| | £35,000 | Building Projects Fund |
| | £20,000 | Mowing fleet |
| | £30,000 | Vehicles |

16. If the Parish is required to hold £500,000 in reserve (currently standing at £762,250), and has allocated £187,500 for future projects, what does the Parish intend to do with the remaining £74,750?

This amount is in general reserves with no allocation of expenditure at the current time. Any overspend will be taken from this at the end of each financial year.

17. I understand that 'future reserve expenditure may relate to future premises'. Is the Parish Council planning to move premises? If so, what savings are you hoping to achieve?

The Parish Council has two years completed on a five year lease at its current premises. This means that the Parish Council has to plan for its future premises to secure the delivery of services for many years to come. The Parish Council is reviewing what is available on an ongoing basis in order to be prepared to either renew, lease new or purchase outright. There are very few premises available of a suitable type and size in West Swindon. The Parish Council is also considering land availability for building. The current garage at the Parish Council is at full capacity and either needs increased storage off the ground or a lockable compound. Both options would have cost implications. It is unlikely that changing premises will generate savings unless the Parish Council takes on a much longer term lease arrangement which could be possible.

18. Paragraph 2.1 states that neither Option 1 or 2 are sufficient to 'offset the impact of future increases in staffing costs'. This implies that the Parish is proposing a deficit budget which will jeopardise future provision. Should there not be a third Option which allows the Parish to at least maintain public services, or even better, improve them? The difference between Option 1 and Option 2 is only £9,269, which suggests there is scope for another option.

In the current budget proposal, the Parish Council is not proposing to change the current level or standard of public services. It is not proposing to reduce staff numbers or use of machines/vehicles.

In Paragraph 2.1 Councillors are being reminded that salaries represent over 50% of the Precept income and if staffing levels remain the same, these will increase on an annual basis. It is reasonable to assume that the rate of increase on staffing costs has the potential to be greater than the amount generated by precept increases. Another option is to start raising the precept in order to set aside an additional amount to cover the annual costs of staffing year on year. Indications are that this is a discussion for the next Parish Council when setting the budget for next year.

It would be useful to see how other Parish Councils manage financially, comparing income, expenditure and outcomes.

It is very difficult to view a like for like comparison. Parishes vary significantly in terms of size and assets. West Swindon Parish Councillors make decisions based on the needs of West Swindon as a place. There is cross dialogue between Parish Councils in relation to service delivery matters and procurement but generally, each Council operates very independently. Stratton St Margaret Parish Council and Haydon Wick are similar but are smaller than West Swindon Parish Council in terms of public open spaces and play areas. Both have their own buildings and multiple allotment sites. Further information on the Precepts set can be found here: [Council Tax property bands and charges by parish | Swindon Borough Council](#)

19. Youth funding (reduction 50%): Which organisations would this effect? There has recently been a lot of anti social behaviour and knife crime involving youths in West Swindon. Surely reducing funding will reduce the opportunities for education, learning new skills and giving advice that could potentially prevent future crime and anti social behaviour.

The Parish Council has been building reserves to enable investment in a youth project at a future date. The youth funding reduction is an indication that there are no funds budgeted to be given to those reserves in the next financial year and that the amount available to groups has reduced from £15,000 to £10,000. The Parish Council grants funds youth activities through grant applications. Grants previously awarded for youth related activities include – West Swindon Family CIC Monday Youth night, Toothill Church Friday Club, Freshbrook Best Holiday activities.

The Parish Council has sought information and advice from other Parish Councils delivering youth services and from Swindon Borough Council. Generally, Parish Councils are offering access to activities and not offering support or advice. Feedback indicated that those participating in Parish Councils youth activities are generally not those that are at risk. At the Full Council meeting, Cllr Mary Martin gave a presentation setting out the range of wrap-around services that are available and targeted towards children who are at risk as victims or perpetrators of crime, those that are on the edge of intervention and care and those with high needs. The Parish Council resolved that

there are a broad range of services, agencies and interventions that are targeted towards the most vulnerable and able to offer appropriate and professional support. It resolved that this is not an area of service delivery for the Parish Council. There are many access points for children and young people to receive advice, support and skills development outside of the Parish Council. As a result, the Parish Council will continue to fund grant applications and invest in quality outdoor provision for all children and young people in West Swindon.

20. Open spaces (reduction from 15,000 to only £5,000) Has the impact of this on people's physical and mental health been discussed and considered? Has the impact of this on the rapidly declining local wildlife been discussed and considered?

The budget for open spaces has been reduced however the range of services, standard and frequency of services and delivery should remain unchanged. The budget reduction provides less cushion or flexibility for unplanned expenditure but should not impact on day to day service delivery.

21. Library (reduction of 50%)

See response to Q.3.

Who is going to cover the funding gap to maintain the provision?

West Swindon is a core library and is delivered as a service through Swindon Borough Council. It is wholly managed by Swindon BC and the Parish Council has no involvement or influence on how it is run. The grant reduction is proposed to acknowledge that the original purpose has changed and evolved over time. In terms of opening hours - this will be a decision for Swindon Borough Council.

Meeting start 6.11 pm.

202. Welcome & Declarations of Interest/Applications for Dispensation

Declarations of Interest required by the Code of Conduct adopted by the Parish Council on 23 May 2022 received – Cllr Sydney Smith Vice Chair of Swindon Borough Council's Childrens Health Committee in relation to Agenda Item 7.

203. Minutes of the previous meeting:

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Parish Council meeting held on Monday 19 December 2022 be approved and adopted.

204. Minutes of the Planning, Leisure & Environment Committee

RESOLVED that the minutes of Planning, Leisure & Environment Committee held on Wednesday 11 January 2023 be approved and adopted.

205. Minutes of the Finance & Staffing Committee

RESOLVED that Recommendation (Minute ref:197) that Full Council approves 34 payments for December 22 totalling £102,314.98 be approved.

RESOLVED that the minutes of Finance & Staffing Committee held on Wednesday 11

January 2023 be approved and adopted.

206. Update from Swindon Borough Councillors

Cllr Williams advised that the next round of Solar Together is likely to be going forward. He reported that the 20 miles zone for Old Shaw Lane is going to consultation in February and Swinley Drive is going to the next stage

207. Updates from Parish Council Representatives

Cllr Singh reported that Clear Channel had been responsive to vandalism and graffiti on bus shelters in Shaw.

Cllr Gould reported that there had been cause to report a number of pavement problems.

208. Update from Cllr Mary Martin re: Youth Support

Cllr M Martin shared a presentation, a copy of which appears as **Appendix A** in the Minute Book. Cllr Martin outlined the scale of support for children in care, on the edge of care, high needs and youth justice services. Councillors thanked Cllr Martin for sharing the information and highlighting the range of wrap around support for vulnerable children and young people.

209. West Swindon Parish Precept 2023-24.

The Chair advised that the Finance and Staffing Committee had presented a proposal for a budget balancing income and expenditure and this was achieved by either a 2% or 3% increase on the Parish Precept depending on the choice of budget reductions.

The Parish Manager referred to a report setting out the detail of the precept proposals, a copy of which is attached as **Appendix B** in the Minute Book. The Parish Manager advised that the precept needed to be considered alongside information relating to the Parish Council's reserves, a copy of which is attached as **Appendix C** in the Minute Book.

Councillors discussed the options set out below and considered the impact on future budgets alongside consideration of the cost of living crisis.

Option 1 A precept total of **£945,405** representing an increase of **2%** on the previous year's Precept budget and an increase of 2.2% on the precept amount for **Band D**

Option 2 A precept total of **£954,674** representing an increase of **3%** on the previous year's Precept budget and an increase of 3% on the precept amount for **Band D**

| | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Precept Requested 2022/23 | £926,868.00 | |
| Tax Base | 8,852.70 | |
| Precept for Band D Property | £104.70 | |
| Options | Option 1 (2%) | Option 2 (3%) |
| Precept Requested 2023/24 | £945,405 | £954,674 |
| Tax Base | 8862 | 8862 |
| Precept for Band D Property | £107 | £108 |
| Increase on Band D | £2.30 (2.2% increase) | £3.30 (3% increase) |

RESOLVED that West Swindon Parish Council submits a precept demand to Swindon Borough Council for the next financial year 2023-2024 of £954,674.00 representing an expected increase of £3.30 (3%) on a Band D equivalent.

Meeting closed 7.15 pm.

Date of next meeting: Monday 27 February 2023 6.00 pm

Signed:
Chair, West Swindon Parish Council

Date: